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STAT Watching the CIA with fewer eyes



WASHINGTON — Can Congress be trusted to keep a secret?

Yes, says William E. Colby, sacrificial lamb to some of the headhunting inquisitors on Capitol Hill.

Colby, the former director of the CIA, is still willing to believe a handful of congressmen can be trusted to keep the faith, even though somebody last week leaked details of a House Intelligence Committee staff report containing top secrets about American intelligence operations.

Of course, Colby finds incongruous the fact secrets were leaked along with staff recommendations for sanctions against anyone leaking leaks.

BUT HE IS convinced that once Congress narrows the number of committees monitoring CIA activities to one, responsibility can be pinpointed, and those charged with overseeing the agency will become cognizant of their sensitive positions.

That is the word from a man who spent 30 years in the intelligence field and has no regrets. Neither has he any qualms about Congress keeping an eye on the CIA. He thinks that can be healthy in a democracy to whose philosophy he is totally dedicated.

Colby has some cause for bitterness. He got sacked in the face of congressional heat for things that happened before he became CIA director in 1973. But if there is rancor, it does not show. And so he says:

"I think after these congressional investigations, the CIA will get better guidelines as to its proper role.

"They will eventually follow our own directives issued in 1973 to correct the mistakes of the past. But this time they will be imposed upon us by law.

"We'll get better supervision from Congress as well as from the executive branch. The old tradition was that you don't ask. It was a consensus that intelligence was apart from the rules.

"That day is over. I'm glad it is over. Because I think that was the reason we did step over the line in a few cases, largely because no one was watching. No one was there to say don't do that.

"And finally, we'll have better secrecy. I think the Congress will structure itself to reduce the number of committees watching over the CIA to one. Right now, there are six oversight committees for the agency. Eight, if you count the House and Senate Select Committees that have investigated us.

"In the past year, I've briefed 59 senators and 149 representatives on CIA operations.

"And I think that we'll get better secrecy from congressional staffs, the executive branch, and CIA employees. Common sense will prevail or the United States intelligence community will cease to be effective."

We spoke with Colby on his last day as director in his offices at the sprawling CIA headquarters near Langley, Va.

A 1940 graduate of Princeton University, Colby joined the Army in 1941, the Office of Strategic Services in 1943, jumped twice behind enemy lines in Europe, and got his law degree from Columbia University after World War II.

With the exception of a brief stint as a private attorney and with the National Labor Relations Board, Colby has been in the intelligence business ever since, from Europe to Southeast Asia. He has been the route. He knows the name of the game. He knows that it is not always a pretty one.

But he contends that the CIA and its many selfless, dedicated agents are essential to the national security of the United States. And while he admits its mistakes, he also deplors its critics who he believes would bury it.

"I think Congress was originally pushed by a sensational press," he said of the Capitol Hill inquiries which he charges dwelled more on the bizarre aspects of CIA work than the less sensational day-to-day intelligence gathering.

"I think now Congress is being pushed by more sensible citizens who think this thing has gotten out of hand, who believe we must not destroy the protection intelligence work provides the nation.

"I don't worry about the Russians laughing at our predicament. But I do worry about our foreign friends, who until now have given us information. If they lose confidence, we will be blinded.

"Some have already cut down. They still talk to us. But they don't tell us everything. And there are individual foreign agents who have cut our agents off completely. Some sources have just refused to risk their lives or their livelihoods.

"FURTHER, SOME Americans, who for patriotic reasons gave us information from abroad, now say they cannot take the chance. They do not care to have their roles bared."

Colby plans to take a few weeks off with his wife and four children. Then he intends to write a book "about what modern intelligence is all about, to shake off the old myths."

Finally, at age 56, he'll dust off his law shingle and put it to use after three decades of service to his country. God speed.